

## The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Philosophy

### “Postcolonial and Decolonial Theories”

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In recent years postcolonial and decolonial feminisms have become increasingly salient in philosophy, yet they are often deployed as conceptual stand-ins for generalized feminist critiques of eurocentrism (without reference to the material contexts anti-colonial feminisms emanate from), or as a platform to re-center internal debates between dominant European theories/ists under the guise of being conceptually ‘decolonized’. By contrast, this article focuses on the specific contexts, issues and lifeworld concerns that ground anti-colonial feminisms and provides a brief survey of the literature. Because the terms implicated in the analysis (Third World, transnational, women of color, postcolonial, decolonial and indigenous feminisms) are highly contested on their own, I only provide provisional and non-foundational histories and definitions for the purposes of resisting philosophical appropriations of anti-colonial feminist theory.

#### 1. Historical Perspectives and Terminology

In western feminist philosophy, the struggles and concerns of non-western and indigenous women are often historicized along a continuum of western feminist theoretical development. They are typically read, cited and valued for their role in pluralizing a dominant canon or contributing to the globalized application of a European theory. As Audre Lorde noted, being valued for one’s ability to “stretch across the gap” of male ignorance and racist feminisms illuminates a deeper, “tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought,” since “it is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns” (1984, p. 114). Thus, the concern here is not a fundamental inapplicability of, for instance, mainstream care ethics in transnational contexts. Instead, it is with the tacit operations of *a deeper interpretive power in feminist theory*, one that recenters itself by producing the effect of difference without the methodological and hermeneutic transformations necessary to bring about what postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak calls a “functional change in a sign system,” one that decenters the very perspective negotiating the centering (1988, p. 4). Thus, rather than a development or pluralizing extension of western feminism, a less imperial way to understand postcolonial and decolonial feminisms is through a longer tradition of women’s theoretical and collective resistance to colonial rule in the Global

South. To this end, it is helpful to first unpack some of the basic contours of postcolonial, decolonial and anti-colonial terminology as they prevail in philosophical circles.

To begin, the ‘colonial’ in the terms ‘postcolonial’ and ‘decolonial’ refers to European colonization that began in the fifteenth century and coincides with the imperial projects of early modern European nation states, including the rise of settler colonial empires like the United States.<sup>i</sup> Backed by the so-called papal *bulls of donation* (1493) and the preceding *dum diversas* (1452) (which granted Iberian rulers the right to enslave non-christians in “perpetual servitude” long before the whitewashed narrative of voyage and discovery dominated colonial historiography), western European powers began a systematic project of cultural domination and geopolitical expansion that included large-scale physical, psychological, epistemic and cultural violence.<sup>ii</sup> From the intergenerational violence and mass slaughter of African peoples in the transatlantic slave trade to the widespread genocides of native Amerindian and aboriginal peoples, European colonialism created a set of social, political, and cultural conditions that begat specific sites of theoretical reflection and resistance across the colonized world. Thus, the first sites of anti-colonial reflection that form the basis for postcolonial and decolonial theory can be traced back to indigenous, native and aboriginal resistance to European domination. This includes armed, cultural and epistemic rebellion, such as indigenous Inca redistribution of Andean deities in the Catholic pantheon of saints and Nahua women’s resistance to native informancy in the Spanish *crónicas*. However, because of the size and scope of the colonial project it is impossible to create an umbrella term for anti-colonialism that does justice to the manifold projects of resistance in the Global South. This is partly a result of colonial domination itself, as the material culture and knowledge systems privileged by European powers has made it difficult to identify, preserve, or gain access to sources in subaltern history (de Certeau, 1988; Boone, 2011; Spivak, 1988b). In light of this, a prevailing strategy in the study of colonialism has been to thematize the systems, practices, policies and ideologies constitutive of the European colonizing mission (such as the dehumanization of non-Western peoples through fabricated racialized taxonomies, hierarchical cast systems based on church-legitimated patrilineal bloodlines, etc.). These broad, far-ranging practices and conceptual orthodoxies became a thematic focus in early postcolonial and decolonial theories, to which we now turn.

The term *postcolonial* came to prominence in academic circles following the 1978 publication of Edward Said’s landmark critique of western representations of non-western cultures in *Orientalism*. It marked a shift in the analysis of colonialism from a historical event to a discourse, or sets of discourses, that predated and outlasted the traditional timeline associated with colonial invasions, settlements, and the official end of colonial rule in national independence movements. Prior to this, the term was mostly used

by historians, political scientists and cartographers as a geopolitical signifier following India's 1947 independence from British rule.<sup>iii</sup> Following the publication of *Orientalism*, South Asian scholars trained or working in former colonies (mainly the US and UK) further developed the field of *postcolonial studies* through what became known as the Subaltern Studies collective. Active between 1982-87 through the publication of five important volumes on South Asian historiography by Oxford university press, the group was led by historiographer Ranajit Guha in close collaboration with Gayatri Spivak and literary theorist Homi Bhabha. Arguing that "hitherto Indian history has been written from a colonialist and elitist point of view," the goal of the collective was not purely academic but to "offer a theory of change" consistent with anti-colonial liberation struggles (Said, 1988, p. v). This was done by providing a "prose of counter-insurgency" or resistant epistemic framework that would allow postcolonial peoples to meaningfully resituate histories that have been buried, destroyed or displaced as part of colonial domination. Due to the emphasis on discourses, strategies and analyses based on the recovery of buried meanings, postcolonial studies flourished in literature, critical history departments and comparative studies. However, elsewhere in the humanities and in activist circles different theoretical tracks emerged that led to various articulations of decolonization processes for postcolonial peoples and women in particular (see Schutte, 2007; Bhambra, 2014). Importantly, some shed light on the gendered and elitist politics of knowledge involved in the new genealogies emerging out of dominant intellectual circles, as many thinkers (such as Frantz Fanon, Jose Carlos Mariátegui, Aime Cesaire, and Safeya Zaghloul) predated Said's work, also focused on questions of cultural and epistemic liberation from coloniality at large, but were not trained at Princeton, Oxford, or Yale. Despite these criticisms, the academic success of the South Asian school of *postcolonial studies* over Indigenous, African, East Asian, and Pacific articulations of subalternity had a significant influence in the academic development of "postcolonial theory". It led, for instance, to the formation of the influential Latin American wing of subaltern studies (including Ileana Rodríguez, Mabel Moraña, Maria Milagros Lopez, John Beverly, and Fernando Coronil) which sought to "revise established and previously functional epistemologies in the social sciences and humanities" as part of a deeper, anti-colonial strategy of resistance (Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, 1993). The region is important for its role in the academic rise of the term 'decolonial'.

The term *decolonial* came to prominence in academic circles following the 2000 publication of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano's article "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America." In it, Quijano argues that the conventional historical association between enlightenment, development and modernity is part of a larger cultural strategy of power and domination by western Europe that is managed by imported/invented categories of racial hierarchies based on white supremacy. Through these tropes, racialized bodies can be made morally, legally and culturally subject to logics compatible with the need

for Europe to exploit a world-wide labor force. Domination went epistemic. That's how such a relatively small part of the world gained *and maintained* global dominance long after the decline of its naval and military supremacy; the role of history is not to reveal this but to produce notions of objectivity that correspond to the objects and methods belonging to European conceptions of truth (which only reflect the epistemic orthodoxies of one cultural tradition). Thus, "the modern capitalist system of power" that lurks behind the appearance of natural development, voyage, discovery and emancipated reason becomes the central axis for thinking from the place of those excluded and oppressed by colonialism. Most importantly, by linking knowledge (as in Cartesian self-reflexive reason) with a post-Wallersteinian world-systems theory of colonialism, Quijano thinks postcolonial peoples *can and ought to* "delink" from the arbitrary linkages made between culture, power and Eurocentric knowledge systems. This *epistemological decolonization* became a central organizing principle in the academic literature associated with 'the decolonial turn' (Mignolo, 1999, 2001 & 2007; Maldonado-Torrez, 2007; Grosfoguel, 2007; Lugones, 2008; Sousa Santos, 2007). The "de" in this sense of "decolonial" is thus an "un"--undoing, unmaking, untying colonialism from its active lifeforce, but not in a romantic way that tries to reverse or go back to an imagined pre-colonial past unmarred by colonialism. While other important literatures on delinking, rupturing, and de-settling colonialism flourished in the humanities and community activism, the U.S.-based Latin American wing of decolonial scholarship gained the most citational force in mainstream philosophical circles, as did the feminisms associated with this tradition.

As points of congruence, postcolonial and decolonial literatures are both anti-colonial and generally share the view that colonialism did not end with national independence movements or the withdrawal of occupying powers (especially in settler societies). With few exceptions, they also embrace the stronger thesis that beyond the lingering effects of historical colonialism, *active forms* of colonial domination continue to operate in society at various levels of transparency, from institutionalized sexist racism and anti-indigenous cultural bias to casteist apartheid, discriminatory public policy and neoliberal carceral economics. The terms are not mutually exclusive (see Johnson, 1982; Nasta, 1992; Nkenkana, 2015). Yet one basic difference between the academic construction of *postcolonial* and *decolonial* is methodology: whereas the former historically focused on the task of identifying cultural biases and lacunas in history, recovering subaltern histories and writing histories 'from below,' the latter sought to displace the mechanisms that, on their view, created and maintained subalternity in the first place. One important tool for the decolonial camp was thus the adoption of a standpoint epistemology that excluded narratives, identities, theories and citational references based explicitly on European texts and influence. As an example, two years prior to Quijano's article, an important meeting occurred at Duke University between the South Asian and Latin American subaltern studies groups that led to the dissolution of the Latin

American group along this very subject. As Ramón Grosfoguel recounts in “The Epistemic Decolonial Turn,” during this meeting the concern was raised over the heavy theoretical influence of “ ‘the four horses of the apocalypse’, that is, Foucault, Derrida, Gramsci and Guha,” all of whom were considered eurocentric thinkers or produced (on his view) eurocentric theory *about* subjects in the South while located physically and epistemically in the North (2007, p. 221). “By privileging Western thinkers as their central theoretical apparatus, they betrayed their goal to produce subaltern studies” (Ibid).<sup>iv</sup> However, there was no parallel break along the widespread scholarly and citational exclusion (with the possible exception of Maria Lugones) of women in the ‘decolonial turn,’ the usurping of indigenous theory or the lack of engagement with African, Black, Asian and Pacific epistemologies of decolonization.

## 2. Postcolonial and Decolonial Feminisms

Women’s situation under colonialism has been characterized as a “double colonization” that, in addition to facing multiple levels of social and behavioral violence, redoubles the theoretical burdens women face in thinking through systems of liberation from colonial oppression (Peterson and Rutherford, 1986; Schutte, 1993). This is not from lack of efforts or strong cultures of resistance: Indigenous, native, aboriginal and women of color’s resistance to European domination have consistently been subsumed in anti-colonial and western feminist struggles-- from Maori women’s resistance to missionary education to First Nation and women of color’s struggles under classical white feminisms in the United States and Canada. As histories of feminist intersectionality show, women theorized racial and gendered oppression long before the academic discourses of postcolonialism and decolonialism rose to prominence (Ruíz, 2017). Yet historically, many of the grand anti-colonial liberatory narratives and theories of resistance failed to center women’s lives as key concerns in fighting coloniality. Thus, many of the feminist theories in anti-colonial scholarship are correctives to both European colonialism and colonialist tendencies in liberation theories. For example, Elina Vuola points out that while Enrique Dussel’s *philosophy of liberation* has been central to anti-colonial discourses of liberation theology, “it seems that in issues of sexual ethics he comes close to official church teaching, even though his argumentation may be different from that of the Vatican” (p. 160).

But not all anti-colonial feminists disentangle themselves from colonial tendencies in anti-colonial scholarship. Some resist it by refocusing its insights in relation to women’s lives without directly critiquing the theories or theorists behind them. For example, Maria Lugones’ influential “Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System” refocuses explanatory priority on *gender* in Quijano’s analysis of colonial racism (2007). She argues that, just like the idea of race, colonialism

introduced a system of heterosexual gender binaries that were paramount in the fusion of race and gender used to exploit colonized peoples. Racialized women's labor, after all, is a locus of primary exploitation in the birth of global capitalism. However, unlike dominant strains of western feminism that prioritize the universal category of 'women' and patriarchal domination as the focal point of oppression, Lugones insists that "we cannot understand this gender system without understanding what Anibal Quijano calls 'the coloniality of power'" (186). On this view, gender cannot be thought without a particular articulation of race. Thus, Lugones maintains theoretical ties with the epistemologies of the decolonial turn<sup>v</sup> while focusing decolonial feminist scholarship on practical, engaged, tactical theories that speak to women's lives and (importantly) *communities*: "in my understanding of decolonial feminism, the community is central, with communal intentionality and complex communality constructing the human" (2017, p. 47). But this is only one articulation of decolonial feminisms. Njoki Wane, Jennifer Jagire and Zahra Murad's landmark volume, *Ruptures: Anti-Colonial & Anti-Racist Feminist Theorizing* shows how global feminist traditions can deploy decolonizing theories without referencing dominant decolonial scholarship in the Anglo-American academy.

For the purposes of defining anti-colonial feminist theories, I suggest that while all anti-colonial feminisms theorize colonial racialized systems of power and their intersections with gender, ethnicity, sexuality and other dominant structures of social power, their frameworks are 1) context-dependent 2) based on individual and collective experiences of oppression 3) related to theories of change (as in plural visions of social transformation) and 4) fundamentally fluid/ internally heterogeneous. The articulation of the subjects, methods and mediums (from academic production to artistic activism) for carrying out resistance therefore depends on the specific circumstances of coloniality and its situated effects on women's lives. On this view, María Lugones' influential definitions of decolonial feminisms (2007, 2010, 2017) are as post/de/anti colonial as the collective communiqués and oral traditions of indigenous Chapotecanas, but potentially in different ways that are not scalar but *historically multidimensional*. That is to say, while the Imperial project was vast and played on many of the same racialized tropes and mechanisms (such as decriminalized rape under slavery and Christian marriage laws) responsible for much of the gender-based violence and subordination of women in geographically and culturally distinct communities, there is no single unifying approach for decoding and unbraiding the traumas of colonialism in women's lives and communities.

For instance, in South Asia, Africa, and Latin America, racialized lower-class women have been especially vulnerable to the impact of the melding of neoliberal economics and humanitarian colonialism (as in microloan economies), structural adjustment programs tied to national trade debts, NGO-led

millennium development goals, sexual trafficking and environmental degradation of native lands. The feminisms that arose in response to these systems have been particularly good at identifying the nature of the global economic, industrial, and political systems that perpetuate gendered harms via the evolution of those structures regionally. They share a great deal with the precarities and violences First Nations, Native American and women of color in the U.S. face, from widespread sexual violence, normalized cultural invisibility and public health crises in maternal deaths and heart disease. Yet the forms of resistance (the “anti” in anti-colonial) in settler societies governed by asymmetrical land treaties and institutionalized gendered racisms are not simply interchangeable (*while being compatible*) with the autonomous feminisms that arose to protest economic liberalization, import substitution industrialization and state-sponsored disappearances of women. They are compatible, and certainly *not disassociated* from each other, as the systematicity of structural violence and sexual trafficking would not be possible if they were. But to understand what is postcolonial or decolonial about feminisms requires a focus on women’s material and historical contexts rather than a primary focus on academic genealogies of concepts. How did colonialism impact women in this region? How are water systems, environmental and traditional models of governance impacted? What violences has it done to kinship structures and configurations of human relations? What metaphysical orthodoxies were used to supplant native ones in relation to women’s lives? How are women’s situations audible or sub-audible in relation to colonial cast systems and their reiteration in modern social and racial hierarchies? How are maternal health systems faring under colonial knowledge systems? How are colonial legal systems responsible for the exclusion and subordination of women in each region? This is not an ‘area studies’ approach but a methodological point to ensure anti-colonial feminisms are not reducible to umbrella terms feminists can deploy against a non-specific sexist eurocentrism. Universalizing tendencies in feminist philosophy, after all, very often operate as colonial mechanisms of power, especially in hegemonic representations of non-western women and through culturally essentialist tropes (Mohanty, 1991; Narayan 1998). What *is* unifying is that the impact of colonial education systems, heteronormative gender binaries, divisions of public and private spheres, legal subordination and structural poverty on women’s lives has been widespread and intergenerational in the Global South. In their various ways, anti-colonial feminisms attempt to come to grips with these layered consequences from their specific locations and to produce systems of power that articulate women’s resistance to coloniality at all levels of lived experience. In this vein, some thinkers that have heavily influenced postcolonial and decolonial feminist scholarship in philosophy are: Chandra Mohanty, Gayatri Spivak, Gloria Anzaldúa, Audre Lorde, María Lugones, Trinh Minha, Ofelia Schutte, bell hooks and Uma Narayan. Landmark publications include “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (Spivak, 1988), *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981), *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Minha, 1989), “The Coloniality of

Gender” (Lugones, 2008), *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Anzaldúa, 1987), *Decentering the Center* (Narayan and Harding, 2000), among others. Key concepts include cultural essentialism, epistemic violence, strategic essentialism, Mestiza consciousness, borderlands, the modern colonial gender system, world-traveling, cultural alterity, and the master’s tools, to name only a few. While the list of influences far outnumbers these selections, in the limited scope of this entry, I focus on thinkers who specifically take up issues focused on colonialism’s impact on women’s lives, especially racialized women in the Global South. A more accurate representation would enumerate a longer list of works and thinkers now central to Latina, Black, Indigenous and autonomous feminisms.

### **3. Future Directions**

At this juncture, tectonic shifts are happening in anti-colonial feminisms. The hold of traditional philosophical boundaries on delimiting authoritative sources is loosening, bringing with it a watershed of interdisciplinary literatures and metaphilosophical reflection on the mechanisms of power responsible for policing the boundaries of feminist theory (see Dotson, 2012). One of the most important shifts is the turn towards women of color and indigenous feminisms as stand-alone work, untethered to the ‘pluralizing the core/canon’ requirements of mainstream feminist theory (see Millon, 2013; Wynter, 2012). The politics of refusal is finally being centered in discussions of anti-colonial feminisms (Simpson, 2007 and 2014). Discourses of “unsettling” settler colonial discourses and patriarchal philosophies are emerging, as are philosophies of cultural revitalization (see Meissner and Whyte, 2017). A new generation of feminist thinkers are grappling with the academic mainstreaming of decolonial literatures, making their own diagnoses of the times, epistemic shifts and methodological openings in feminist anti-colonial work. The citational centering of male senior academics is weakening in a field that historically perpetuates the invisibility of racialized women and indigenous peoples. In this context, postcolonial and decolonial feminists are a moving polygon of shared concerns while being irreducible to an umbrella term. There is no single ‘postcolonial,’ ‘decolonial’ or ‘anti-colonial’ feminist philosophy but diverse genealogies of feminist practices. Lastly, it bears repeating--until that day when ‘a functional change in a sign system’ actually arrives-- that there are long-standing anti-colonial intellectual histories by indigenous theorists and women of color that do not use the terms decolonial, postcolonial, or even anti-colonial, yet have contributed significantly to the intellectual imaginations of the theorists cited in this limited, colonialist medium of historiography.



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## NOTES

<sup>i</sup> 'Colonial' is sometimes used critically to refer to cases that fall outside the historical centering of western Europe in intercultural domination, considering instead cases of East-East or North-North relations. The two main examples are Taiwanese colonial histories (especially of Paiwan aboriginal peoples) under Japanese occupation and Nordic Saami sovereignty struggles in Europe. More recently, literature has emerged that strongly highlights Dutch colonial intervention in Taiwan, as well as Dutch and British intervention in China through the opium wars and the British colony of Hong Kong. (See also Kuokkaken, 2006).

<sup>ii</sup> While *dum diversas* authorized Iberians "to invade, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens, pagans, and other enemies of Christ, to put them into perpetual slavery, and to take away all their possessions and property," (Newcomb, p. 84) the cultural orthodoxies behind imperial colonialism predate the rise of Christianity in Europe.

<sup>iii</sup> During this period it appears written as a hyphenated term to accent the 'post' as the time *after* colonialism. This temporal definition still exists today; it is favored by historians, international relation scholars and political scientists that want to emphasize the shifting geopolitical formations resulting from anti-colonial rebellions, particularly in South Asia and Africa. However, it increasingly goes by the term 'decolonial' now. This is an example of both terms being utilized in the historically limited, traditional sense to mark a time, place or phenomenon that is empirically verifiable by western evidentiary standards. Cf. *Voices of Decolonization* (Todd, 2015).

<sup>iv</sup> It bears repeating that the 'rise' of decolonial scholarship coincided with the academically-curated articulation of long-standing themes, issues and perspectives held in common by indigenous, First Nations, aboriginal and people of color throughout the Global South. Far from being a mere metaphilosophical point, recognizing that the recent uptake of decolonial thought coincided with the *rearticulation of anti-colonialism* via the weighty, privileged topics of privileged fields (i.e., epistemology) by academic elites in elite institutions (Duke, Rutgers, Berkeley) through settler languages (English, Spanish), grapholects (Romanized alphabetic literacy) and mediums (peer-reviewed theoretical reflection) is critically important. For one, it enabled the conceptual

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decoupling of the epistemic and anti-colonial project as distinct parts of decoloniality, sufficient to allow some philosophers to title (and publishers to market) their books as “decolonial” to mean a general “rethinking of” anything. Second, it significantly obscures the expropriation of indigenous knowledges into academic careers, such as the concept of “pluriversality”. Third, it neglects to note how both terms (post and decolonial) were in wide circulation in anti-colonial literatures and activism before their coinage in academic circles, whether in adjectival or adverbial form to describe anti-colonial strategies and tactics at every level of culture. Black Elk’s (Oglala Lakota) speeches and Leanne Simpson’s (Nishnaabeg) *Islands of Decolonial Love*, for instance, are both examples of postcolonial and decolonial literatures without academic entanglement in the subalternity or epistemic decolonization literatures, yet *they enact similar moves* that are very often philosophically devalued.

<sup>v</sup> She writes: “I share the idea [with Mignolo and Quijano] that the dehumanization produced by the modern/colonial system of power is *the* form-within-which decoloniality is conceived and theorized” (ibid, emphasis added).